



## RAO CONVENTION 2007

### THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS TO DEMOCRATIC DEVELOPMENT IN GHANA'S FOURTH REPUBLIC

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#### Introduction & Definitions

Democratic development encompasses instigating changes and growth in social institutions and processes in a manner that inure to the benefit of the largest numbers of people in a society by enhancing their scale of well-being. The instigations typically cover the political, economic, educational, religious, and familial institutions of society.

Civil society is frequently construed narrowly as the intersection between the state and the family. In my view, civil society properly understood encompasses a broad spectrum of realms and actors that include the individual, community, government<sup>1</sup>, business, and voluntary organizations. As O'Connell (1999) points out, "*civil society exists in the intersection where the various elements of society come together to protect and nurture the individual and where the individual operates to provide those same protections and liberating opportunities for others.*"

Helmut Anheier (2004) defines civil society as "the sphere of institutions, organizations and individuals located between the family, the state and the market in which people associate voluntarily..."<sup>2</sup>

Whatever scope and interpretation one gives to the concept of civil society, it is generally agreed that the individual, community, business (including the mass media), and the voluntary sector (including participation in public, charitable and religious life), are critical components of that amorphous entity which constitutes the elemental foundation of democracy. Direct civil society action, including lobbying and advocacy, have meant the difference between growth and stagnation, be it in ideas or enterprise.

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<sup>1</sup> Government is the third component of civil society. As Brian O'Connell rightly points out in his classic work, *Civil Society: The Underpinnings of American Democracy* (1999: 18), government is "an element often left out in definitions of civil society, which focus only on the space that exists *between* the individual and government. ... [A]ny definition of civil society ... has to include the essential participation of citizens in democratic government and the essential role of government in providing and protecting citizen participation in the first place". I share these views.

<sup>2</sup> Anheier, Helmut (2004) *Civil Society: Measurement, Evaluation, Policy*, Earthscan: London, p.22



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The political and social theorist David Mathew once observed that “*We think about how dependent the public is on good government... but we lose sight of how much good government needs a good public*”.

Fortunately, for us in Ghana, there is widespread acknowledgement of the centrality of civil society to Ghana’s democratic development under the Fourth Republic. Indeed, one of the Ivy League NGOs in this country, a convener of this timely and important 3<sup>rd</sup> RAO Convention, bears the name Ghana Centre for Democratic Development, highlighting its clear ideological orientation and foundations in liberal democratic growth. Civil society played a dynamic role in the incubation and birth of the Fourth Republic, and it has since then ensured its careful but robust nurturing, growth and development along an ever-expanding democratic path.

Civil society in Ghana is playing an increasingly vibrant role in Ghana’s democratic development. Civil society engagements in this arena have traversed such diverse fields as instigating electoral reforms and debating political party financing through preservation of the environment for the greater social good, sometimes led by traditional authorities (who are often forgotten in popular conceptualizations of civil society), to leadership in health and sanitation issues.

But civil society is not a recent force on the national political and democratic development landscape. Community groups, churches and religious groups, the media or political interest groups have long played important roles on both the local and national levels. More recently, they have assumed a generally refined proactive involvement in national democratic development efforts in ways that demonstrate maturation in strategic thinking, coalition building and recognition of the benefits of fostering synergies.

Ghanaian civil society has made a significant and sustained contribution to the promotion and protection of human rights. Even so, the Ghanaian State has sometimes tried to render the centrality and role of civil society both invisible and ineffective through repressive actions, especially in the 1970s.

In the 1980s, active Ghanaian civil society largely took the form of activist interest groups, both leftist and rightist, seeking to articulate and actualize different conceptions and arrangements of democracy and popular participation in governance.

A critical niche in civil society was also carved and occupied by **religious** groups, both orthodox and charismatic. In the 1990s and beyond, civil society took the form of political parties and rights-expanding bodies organized around issues of resistance and agitation for the greater realization of respect for substantive rights and freedoms, including most especially substantive equality rights for women and persons with disability, beyond the formal equality guarantees enshrined in the Constitution of Ghana 1992. On the political and economic development front, the critical interventions of the following CSOs in the 4<sup>th</sup> Republic are worthy of note:

### 1. GBA



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2. NUGS
3. TUC
4. IEA
5. CDD-Ghana
6. CEPA
7. IDEG
8. FIDA
9. AWLA
10. Third World Network
11. ASDR
12. WANEP
13. Faith-based organizations
14. GJA
15. Kume-Preko
16. Committee for Joint Action

Civil society groups have played vital roles in governmental processes and the formation of social policies in pluralistic Ghana. Leaders of important civil society groups, such as the Association of Professional Bodies, the Ghana Bar Association, and the Ghana Christian Council, have played direct, continuous and active roles in the post-independent political apparatus and processes.

In keeping with established political realism in interest group politics, those civil society organizations that have had a significant impact on political developments, social policy and human rights in Ghana have been those that have reached some threshold of size, homogeneity of goals, and organizational capability. Indeed, the most influential civil society groups are those that possess sound leadership competence, physical resources, organizational cohesion, integrity and credibility, i.e., *institutional power*.

In the areas of development generally, many CSOs have added new dimensions to traditional politics and have helped foster novel forms and platforms for addressing critical challenges in our democratic development – from capacity-building for key governance institutions such as Parliament, the Judiciary, CHRAJ, NCCE, Media Commission and the Electoral Commission, to combating corruption and ensuring greater accountability, transparency and grassroots participation in governance.

Above all, CSOs have contributed significantly to the expansion of the social and political space for large numbers of Ghanaians to belonging meaningfully to Ghana society. For instance, the Ghana Society for the Disabled has led a robust campaign to champion the rights of persons with disability, culminating in a broadening of societal awareness of debilitating and ravaging impact of direct and adverse effect discrimination on their lives, and the necessity to improve access to facilities and services that are customarily available to the public. By challenging traditional thinking and orthodoxy on disability and the quality of life of persons with disability, the novel social and democratic development frameworks advanced through advocacy for legislative reform by persons with disability and their allies in the struggle for human rights and equality have widened the political aperture for a greater sense of *belonging*, a better state of *being*, and a more human and *humane* form of existence.

Similarly, gender-focused civil society groups, ranging from women's professional development organizations through legal advocacy and service provision bodies to research and public policy tank tanks, have contributed immensely to the movement of the nation toward greater equality and the realization of the compelling dream of *belonging*, in its most fundamental sense, to society as an equal, effective and secure citizen. They have pushed diverse social and political development activist and transformative agenda that have expanded both the social and political space for greater democratization, greater human rights observance, greater equality, and greater overall social development for girls, women, boys and men. They have articulated the need for attention to be paid to gender issues in the organization and operations of state institutions and private sector entities, in order that the perspectives, lived experiences, contributions, and interests of women and girls are properly incorporated and reflected in the work and outcomes of such bodies. Some gender-focused CSOs have teamed up with males to launch a sustained campaign, even in the face of unbridled conservatism and patriarchal ethos, to secure the passage of a law criminalizing domestic violence and providing a broad range of culturally appropriate measures for its control in Ghanaian society. That success of that effort also underscored the long-held recognition that the feminist movement must be an inclusive enterprise with a place for males in the effort to propel society toward the liberation of both women and men from the awful shackles of patriarchal dominance and oppression.

Among other things, the contributions of civil society to democratic development in Ghana's 4<sup>th</sup> Republic have encompassed:

- Promoting constitutional growth and constitutionalism
- Promoting human rights and popular participation as pillars of democracy
- Creating an enabling political and legal environment for economic growth
- Providing platforms for economic research and discourse on economic matters
- Combating crime and ensuring greater national and citizen security
- Struggles for gender equality and equity
- Promoting the development of political parties and cognate institutions
- Fostering capacity building for independent national governance institutions
- Providing sustained and credible leadership on the anti-corruption front
- Enhancing media role in accountability and governance
- Mobilizing social capital and other resources to facilitate development initiatives
- Challenging the political elite to manifest sound political leadership
- Contributing to conflict resolution and education policy formulation
- Provisions of health and education facilities
- Initiating and participating in poverty reduction strategies
- Participating in the African Peer Review Process

The list is endless.

But organized civil society contribution to democratic development in Ghana is largely:



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- an urban phenomenon
- donor-driven and elite-led
- fraught with opportunistic, “brief-case NGOs” which exploit the vulnerability of the poor and the generosity of the rich to line their pockets
- Characterized by patron-clientelism or neo-patrimonialism and the creation of GoNGOs. With their dubious, government-backed programs, such entities tend to be short-lived, having tied their longevity to the lifespan of the Government in power. They also clutter and limit the social and political space for serious civil society engagement with the problems of democratic governance

For the future, civil society, particularly the voluntary sector and business, must engage Government in creative efforts to ameliorate the conditions of disadvantage of diverse populations vulnerable to exclusion, exploitation and extortion.

In this vein, the initiatives of the Centre for Public Interest Law in seeking protection for large armies of evictees from Agboblohsie the advocacy work of the Legal Resources Centre, and LAWA’s work with domestic workers in the country, are to be celebrated

With respect to the future of democratic governance and development in Ghana, civil society must continue to work against the penchant of the ordinary Ghanaian to act as passive victims of undemocratic practices, opaque conduct and corrupt public management styles. They must act, instead, as critical change agents through pushing for the implementation of invigorated and well-articulated democratic development programs that concern them. They must infuse greater levels of personal integrity and industry in their work, especially as we move toward oil drilling in the coming months, so we are not drilled by crooked economic and political actors.

Civil society groups must help to introduce civility into public discourses. It must also promote and engage processes that foster self-education and the development of a critical mind-set for the liberation of

It is trite that effective governance requires effective states, empowered civil societies and productive private sectors.

Thank you.